

# Advocacy Tips: Suicide Deterrent Bridge Barriers

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) recognizes that physical barriers are the most effective means of preventing suicides on bridges and other high structures. This tipsheet offers helpful resources and recommendations for individuals who are interested in advocating for suicide deterrent barriers on bridges in their communities. This document is designed specifically to apply to bridges and not to other high structures. While successful advocacy can take time to have an impact, by engaging passionate community members and other key players, it is possible to create change and save lives.

**Please reach out to the AFSP Public Policy Office at [advocacy@afsp.org](mailto:advocacy@afsp.org) for further information or with any questions.**

## 1 Identify Key Players

Successful advocacy efforts will engage a broad range of individuals and organizations in your community dedicated to preventing suicide. Key players for your particular bridge barrier effort will depend on the specific needs of your community, the bridge's location, and the authorities that have oversight over the bridge.

Key players may include:

### Advocates

Advocate voices are incredibly powerful when working toward the installation of suicide deterrent bridge barriers. Advocates can share their connection to the cause and emphasize why barriers are needed from a personal perspective. Survivors of suicide loss, individuals and families with lived experience, health professionals, first responders, researchers, and other interested community members can all be advocates.

### Partner Organizations

Local and state level groups or organizations with an interest in suicide prevention and mental health can lend their skills, voices, and expertise to advocacy efforts. These can include local **AFSP chapters** or other state or local chapters/affiliates of nonprofit organizations. Other "outside the box" partners have included cycling groups and students at local universities (e.g., engineering majors, political science majors, etc.).

### Public Officials and Other Visible Community Leaders

Individuals who serve in public-facing positions within the community can use their positions of power to raise awareness, create opportunities for important conversations with decision-makers, and strengthen advocacy efforts.

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## Decision-Making Authorities

Policymakers and the governing body (or bodies) responsible for overseeing and approving bridge modifications and maintenance will ultimately need to agree to the design, funding, and installation of any suicide deterrent bridge barrier. Those responsible are typically determined by the bridge's physical location (e.g., if the bridge spans two different states or counties).

Decision-making authorities can include:

- Local legislators and executives (e.g., mayors and city councilmembers)
- State legislators and executives (e.g., governors, state senators, and state representatives)
- Local and state agencies (e.g., bridge authorities and departments of transportation)
- Federal agencies (e.g., National Park Service or U.S. Department of Transportation if the bridge is located in or over a National Park or Forest)

## 2 Build a Broad Coalition

Bring together key players that support installing barriers and meet regularly to coordinate, strategize, and take action. A coalition is not required to include all individuals/entities listed above, and may further vary in makeup based on the specific needs of your community. Additionally, a coalition does not have to be a large group of individuals – one or two strong voices can effect change through powerful and organized advocacy. Ideally, a lead individual will be identified who can regularly communicate with the coalition, hold meetings in person or virtually, and organize resources.

## 3 Research Bridge History

Be aware of your bridge's specific history and any previous efforts to implement suicide deterrent barriers. The unique needs of your local community and the bridge's history must be well understood and taken into account as your coalition develops a plan of action.

## 4 Create an Action Plan

An action plan will help your coalition identify and follow the necessary steps to install a suicide deterrent barrier. Work with coalition members and use previous research to create your plan:

### Engage the Coalition

Update them regularly on new developments and provide opportunities to be involved. This can include encouraging coalition members to attend meetings or hearings, offer verbal or written testimony, sign onto letters, and/or educate their networks.

### Address Funding

Your action plan will need to address funding for the design and installation of the barrier. Consult our [issue brief](#) and one-pager, "[Federal Funding Opportunities for Bridge Barriers](#)" for ideas and examples on how barriers can be funded.

### Consider Whether Legislation is Needed

Your action plan may or may not include working with lawmakers to propose legislation or policy changes. For legislative examples, consult our [issue brief](#).

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## 5 Educate and Engage the Community

Identify opportunities for your coalition to educate the community and raise awareness on the need for a suicide deterrent barrier. Key players should use shared talking points and be familiar with and prepared to correct the common misconceptions about barriers (see below).

### **Suicide Deterrent Barriers are Effective, Evidence-Based Tools to Prevent Suicide**

To learn more about how and why barriers work, read our [issue brief](#).

### **When Used Safely, Social Media and Press can be Effective Tools in Educating Others and Raising Awareness**

Please reference our safe messaging toolkit here before engaging media.

### **Advocates May Receive Pushback when Organizing and Mobilizing Support for Bridge Barriers**

Opposition can come from anyone, including policymakers, agency leads, or the public; it is important to understand the reasons why someone might oppose a bridge barrier. Below are some examples of common misconceptions and how to correct them.

**MISCONCEPTION:** "Barriers won't help, because people will find another method."

**CORRECTION:** General research has found that individuals thwarted in utilizing a preferred method of suicide do not seek alternative methods.<sup>1</sup>

**MISCONCEPTION:** "It's too expensive."

**CORRECTION:** A barrier not only decreases deaths by suicide in the location, but also aids in preventing suicides for the entire city where the barrier is installed.<sup>2</sup> The benefits of saving lives should outweigh any of these funding concerns.

Many may not realize that in addition to the priceless cost of losing a person, suicide deaths have high financial impacts. In 2022, the CDC reports the estimated total cost of suicides by fall stood at over \$13 billion. Implementing barriers can be an effective suicide prevention solution, reaping long-term benefits for the country by saving lives and allowing crucial funds to be invested into other lifesaving prevention and intervention services each year..

**MISCONCEPTION:** "Barriers would make the historic and architecturally significant bridges ugly."

**CORRECTION:** Although there are unique challenges to designing a barrier, the benefit of saving lives should outweigh aesthetic concerns. There are also opportunities to engage governing bodies and the community in creating satisfactory and aesthetically pleasing design solutions for new barriers.

To see an example of a historic bridge that successfully installed and incorporated a suicide deterrent barrier into its design, see the [Luminous Veil](#).

## 6 Persevere and Practice Self-Care!

Remember that progress is not linear. Sometimes momentum may stall for a while, but advocacy is an ongoing process – it is important to take it step by step and celebrate small successes. Prepare for the possibility of insensitive comments from individuals and groups opposed to the installation of a barrier. Remember that individuals have varying experiences with suicide, but everyone can be affected and unite for change. Above all else, practice self-care throughout this process and look out for one another. Taking care of our physical, emotional, and spiritual health helps us become better advocates.

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## 7 Consult Helpful AFSP Resources

- [Architectural Barriers Issue Brief](#)
- [Federal Funding Opportunities for Bridge Barriers](#)
- [Bridge Barriers Media Guidance](#)
- [Safe Messaging Guidance for Advocates](#)
- [Support for Survivors of Suicide Loss One Pager](#)
- [Self-Care Strategies for Resilience Flyer](#)

**Please reach out to AFSP's Policy and Advocacy Office at [advocacy@afsp.org](mailto:advocacy@afsp.org) with any questions, and we thank you for your advocacy.**

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<sup>1</sup> Reisch, T., Schuster, U. & Michel, K. (2007). Suicide by jumping and accessibility of bridges: Results from a national survey in Switzerland. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 37(6), 681-687. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1521/suli.2007.37.6.681>

<sup>2</sup> McQuigge, M. (2017, June 20). Barrier at Toronto's Bloor Viaduct significantly reduced suicides: Study. *The Globe and Mail*. Retrieved from <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/toronto/barrier-at-torontos-bloor-viaduct-significantly-reduced-suicides-study/article35395466/>.